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ABSTRACT

Collaborative learning, in which students form small groups to analyze their own writing, can cause students who recognize good writing and know the "rules" to reexamine their own writing and writing processes and then produce an acceptable product. Given eight sample paragraphs from their own writing, 20 freshman students working in 5 groups provided insightful criticisms that were then used to generate a provocative 4-part paragraph heuristic. The four "rules" they came up with covered levels of generalization, use of evidence, the need for pausing to explore implications of ideas, and the importance of cohesiveness and comprehensive coverage at each level of the paragraph. The next set of papers handed in showed the distinct improvement produced when the students used these rules for self-checking paragraphs. Not just a fine pedagogical tool, this student-generated heuristic is just one example of the breakthroughs possible when collaborative learning is used on the college level. This format helps the teacher as well as the student to go beyond the often unproductive rules of traditional approaches to teaching. (An appendix charts sample paragraphs in terms of the heuristic.) (JL)

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A Pitch for Collaborative Learning: Discovering A Paragraph Heuristic

Barbara C. Mallonee

From the moment I overheard one freshman say to another, "If I could only figure out what she wants...," I have devoted my teaching career to devising ways to toss the ball to students in order that they learn that characteristics of a good piece of writing are not dependent on a freshman composition teacher's whim. The work done by Kenneth Bruffee on collaborative learning has occasioned a breakthrough for me in showing students successful writing is not a matter of satisfying professorial eccentricity. During small group sessions I ran with three classes during a fall semester and three more in the next spring, my students astounded me with innovative analysis of eight sample paragraphs from their very first compositions. Their insights so helped me to refine what I "want" that I now consider collaborative group work a move toward self-sufficiency for students and professors alike.

My plan that September morning last fall was to divide twenty freshmen into five groups of four. They were to read the xeroxed eight paragraphs and then discuss them for thirty minutes to reach judgmental consensus. During that period of chaos, I would squirm at my desk, wincing at the noise and praying an administrator wouldn't walk by. Afterward, I would flash the paragraphs on a screen with an overhead projector, pay perfunctory attention to what my students had to say, and then upstage them for the next forty-five minutes.

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Their brilliant analysis of the paragraphs undid my plan. We began with a paragraph that anyone teaching writing in a baseball town like Baltimore can, barring a strike, expect in September:

> Attending an Oriole game is a fun experience. Generally speaking, any team that is a consistent winner plays an exciting brand of baseball. The Orioles are winners and do play exciting baseball. They make the game enjoyable for their fans. The Orioles are an exciting team to watch. Numerous times throughout this past season they have come from behind late in the game to win it. Anyone who is a knowledgeable baseball fan knows the Orioles are one of the most exciting teams in baseball. The fans never left the ballpark without witnessing some exciting moment produced by the Orioles. I enjoyed many moments this past season. The most exciting play that I witnessed was a gamewinning homerun hit by Eddie Murray.

"Fun experience" is a clue the reader is about to slosh into what James Britton calls expressive writing. The writer reports that this "exciting team" plays "exciting ballgames" full of "exciting moments" and "exciting plays," and only when she hits "Eddie Murray" do our eyes light up...but the paragraph ends.

This euphoric salute to baseball is not a good paragraph. Professors and professionals would not think so, but my students didn't think so either. Robert Pirsig, in Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, observes that students can recognize Quality. Freshmen at Loyola College, who do not enter a classroom ready to analyze Moby Dick or assess lab experiments, know that this student paragraph is boring and clichéd. No student in the room that September day liked the paragraph--save one. The girl who wrote it thought it was wonderful. She was confident it must be, for she knew the rules for writing paragraphs and had since fourth grade.

This paragraph is not, however, to be blamed on the particular failings of a fourth grade teacher. In fact, all students, indeed all writers, have incredible blind spots when it comes to their own writing. Collaborative learning can startle students who recognize good writing and know the "rules" to re-examine their own writing and writing processes and then produce an acceptable product. In a group setting, the student, with eight eyes boring into him, demanding not to be bored, is forced to see his writing is transactional. While I won't posit with Plato and Ken Bruffee that collaborative learning is the ultimate epistemological enterprise, group learning does make students assume responsibility for Quality Control.

Thus, the students were candid in their judgment of this first paragraph. They were equally critical of the other paragraphs. And they not only mouthed what I had set them up to say, that most of the paragraphs were awful, but they spilled out a fuller catalogue of error-types than I had ever identified in precise, albeit unscholarly, terminology.

They diagnosed the baseball paragraph as a "doesn't go anywhere" paragraph. Without knowing Britton's and Kinneavy's term "expressionistic writing," the students could nonetheless complain that the writer knew what was exciting and the reader did not. This paragraph that goes nowhere should have climbed down Hayakawa's "abstraction ladder,"[1] descending often to the level of Jim Palmer and Bowie Kuhn. The reader wants to see in vivid detail, in terms of foul balls and beer, what is exciting about Oriole games.

A second paragraph, however, demonstrated that building in examples is no fool-proof recipe for a good paragraph:

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[1]S.I. Hayakawa, "How We Know What We Know," Language and Thought and Action (Revised, 1963).

> The combat soldier is often treated very harshly in times of war. In a movie I saw recently, The Boys in Company C, the infantrymen were either being attacked by snipers or under near-constant mortar fire. There were at least thirty casualties. In another movie, American forces fired at their own patrols. In another show, M*A*S*H, the doctors received summer shorts and mosquito netting in the dead of winter, not to mention that they usually didn't get enough medicine or they got the wrong type.

This writer tells us that the combat soldier is treated harshly--hardly an original observation--and he developed this broad topic sentence with three examples. The class called this a "clunk" paragraph. It thuds from generalization to specific examples in two sentences, probably indicating too great an initial leap from particulars to generalization to begin with, a problem that can often lead to a strange range of evidence in student papers. In this case, the students saw that fictive evidence was simply inappropriate.

The third paragraph, in contrast, has details, but it violates truth for effectiveness:

> The life guards on the Ocean City beaches only do their job to get attention. Bixby Bigly has been the lifeguard on Forty-Second Street for five years. It is an unwritten rule that all lifeguards must have blond hair. Unfortunately, Bix is a natural brunette. He remedies this problem with the application of Clairol 700 peroxide three times a month at Sally's Beauty Shop on North Division Street. Sally treats all the guards' hair to produce a soft natural-looking golden blonde. Lifeguards have to be at least six-feet and one-inch tall and 190 pounds. Five years ago Bix was a small, skinny five-feet-two-inch runt. Steroids increased his physique to six feet and three inches, 210 pounds of pure muscle. Bixby's

> parents were pure Irish and he was pale as a ghost. His determination led him to invest in a General Electric sun lamp. In three days, Bixby was as dark as a lobster.

Although the students enjoyed the peroxide and suntan, they complained that Bixby Bigly was literally "unreal." In my terms, the evidence is "concrete/general" rather than "concrete/specific," a crucial distinction. Bixby, a composite of many lifeguards, never existed. The individual details seem genuine and the need for absolute proof very small in this writing situation, but the ethics of concrete/general composites became an apt topic for discussion when Janet Cook's Pulitzer Prize was revoked because she created an eight-year-old drug addict who never actually existed.

The third paragraph, to quote the students, did "flow," and so does the fourth paragraph, in which tee-shirts are compared to billboards and the implications of that begin to be worked out:

> Tee-shirts have become the billboards of the nation. Tee-shirts display their wearers' personalities. The slogan on the front puts emotions on exhibit. It tells your reactions and feelings to certain situations and stimuli. How you feel about disco, what you think of women's liberation, and your opinion of yourself can be expressed via the shirt. The way the shirt is worn tells a lot also. And tee-shirts reflect the society in which they are worn. Addressing social problems of announcing activities, community life is apparent on tee-shirt fronts. But even more important is the mood of society. Life is now more open and free of frills, and tee-shirts show just this.

Reader and writer go several rungs down the abstraction ladder, permitting strong sub-analysis in the paragraph, but as one student asked

wistfully, "Where are the tee-shirts?" Good writers pause--often--to support their ideas as Mina Shaughnessy implies when she diagnoses immature writers as those who reach closure much too early.[2] Good writers know to choose "pausing places" at each level of generalization. They continue to probe the implications of their statements at several levels of generality until they reach the bottom level of concrete example.

The fifth paragraph also suffers from a shortage of detail--one can't get much less specific than "thing," but one student also saw that the paragraph is repetitive:

> Another problem encountered when one's father is a doctor is that, ironically, his family usually lacks proper medical treatment and so does he. Because there is a doctor there, he feels no need for regular physical examination for his family and for himself. Many small symptoms are often overlooked. Things which will probably amount to nothing are usually considered as just that--nothing, whereas in other households they would probably be checked out just in case. I don't mean to say that doctors are careless about their families' health, but many things are often taken for granted. They, too, should have periodic check-ups, but most don't.

Each time the writer talks about the impact on family, he tags on "and on the doctor too." He needs to realize that he should pause to develop each subpoint in the paragraph before he reveals the whole of his reasoning. As one student put it, "he doesn't have to lay it all on us at once."

On the other hand, the writer does eventually have to explore the full implications of his idea or, if omitting detail, do so deliberately.

> Another spoilage of New York, which can cause an unpleasant experience for the tourist astray, is the unusually high crime rate. Innocent, lost tourists wandering about Manhattan are

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[2]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York, 1977), p. 227.

> easily spotted by the common deviant, particularly after dark. Glancing around Time Square, I quickly realized that I was an easy target and retreated to the subway terminal--helpless.

This paragraph about the "spoilage of New York" is certainly not a full analysis, as one student put it, "of close encounters of the criminal kind in New York City."

Significantly, even the longest paragraph, clearly written by a more skillful writer who runs up and down the abstraction ladder, did not satisfy student critics:

> In addition to setting a poor example, the coaching staff does not properly instruct and train the children. The coaches often tell their teams to use dirty tactics. Coach Minster always said, "Throw your elbows at the opposing players when the referees aren't looking." Mr. Murphy, a coach in the eleven-twelve football league, had his players pile on the opposition until the officials broke it up. Coach Trombetta instructed his basketball team to subtly step on the shoes of the opposing players when they tried to jump. Mr. Minster also failed to teach us the three basic fundamentals of basketball: dribbling, passing, and shooting. Instead, he had us practice a complicated full-court zone press. Coach McKew had his Little League baseball team playing practice games before most of the kids knew how to catch, throw, and hit the ball proficiently. Young players must first develop fundamental skills before they can be expected to effectively apply them. Stretching exercises, which according to doctors prevent muscle injuries, are also neglected by the coaches. My friend Tom suffered from a muscle strain on his thigh because our coach, Mr. Minster, failed to have him do the hurdler's stretch before he played. Many coaches also act like drill sergeants and run their team without mercy in full football gear on a hot August day. It is

> also appalling to see how ten-year old lacrosse players are allowed to pound each other to the ground with their sticks. In one game, I watched two players get carried off the field because of the rough play that the coaches permitted.

They observed that the writer uses only what they called "here's-one here's another" transitions; words like "also" and "in addition" and "in the first (or second or third) place" do not permit the ultimate logical binding that a good writer who has synthesized material employs. In fact, Mina Shaughnessy, who finds poor essays low in cohesive devices, defines good writing in terms of cohesion when she calls it "a technology for holding vast and complex units of thought together."[3]

The eighth paragraph, a causal analysis of busing, is a good paragraph though, curiously enough, its author wasn't sure that it was:

> When I finally adjusted to the violence in the school I was bussed to, there was nothing for me to learn. The eighth grade for me was spent at a school where the students were so busy causing interruptions, the teachers didn't bother to teach. At Garrison Junior High, the problem was a vicious circle. Students' violent acts caused teachers to refuse to teach, which caused student boredom, which caused more violence. I once witnessed a boy get slammed against a set of lockers and have punches jammed into his stomach until he slumped to the floor in agony. The noise this scene created disrupted a whole floor of classes, causing lectures to cease. Stephanie, a petite girl who was pretty much a loner, was forced to drink water until she gagged. She, luckily, was rescued by Mrs. Rucker, an English teacher. This type of disturbance no longer bothered me because I learned to ignore it. I reached a point where I was able to eat lunch in the middle of a cafeteria food fight. The teachers, however, were so fed up with stink bombs interrupted lectures that they often let classes out early just to avoid the hassles. With classes

[3]Shaughnessy, p. 233

> let out early just about every day, I rarely had homework. I did not fill my empty hours with senseless violence as did many others. Nonetheless, I grew spoiled by the easy life of not having to carry textbooks, not having to study for tests or quizzes, and not having to use one iota of a brain cell to think a single thought of my own. My grades were excellent. I received A's in science, math, social studies, and French, and B's in physical education and typing.

The paragraph is good for a number of reasons. In the first place, this is a paper of feeling, but the discourse is transactional, not expressive. The situation is real and specific; through her specifics, the writer, a black student, makes credible implications about busing, government intervention, freedom. She builds a logical network of ideas, but then she sinks down to the level of things; as a result, communication cannot derail as it does when abstract statements trigger as many different scenarios as there are people in a room. Often students who do not use concrete detail can write absolutes such as, "multinational corporations affect foreign policy"; when pressed, they are unable to give a single instance and yet insist that the statement is true. Lynn does give her "instances." Though rich in detail, the paragraph is not redundant, and it does go somewhere, which suggests that cohesive ties might actually be the final impetus for illumination. Despite problems in style, students recognized this paragraph as the best of the eight.

I rather casually chose eight paragraphs to represent a range of errors. I was taken aback by the comprehensiveness of the students' consensual diagnosis of paragraph problems on the first day of our discussion. Therefore, instead of delivering a definitive lecture on paragraphs the second day, I optimistically asked my students what the writers of these

paragraphs should do to improve their paragraphs. My open agenda was warranted. The twenty freshmen generated a very provocative heuristic:

RULE #1: Make sure a paragraph, unless introductory, transitional or final, has four or more levels of generalization.

RULE #2: Make sure the bottom level is accurate and appropriate actual-factual/specific-concrete evidence.

RULE #3: Establish pausing places on each level above the bottom level to explore implications of ideas.

RULE #4: Make sure any one level is comprehensive in coverage; use cohesive devices to assure and communicate this.

When their next papers came in, it was clear that these four "rules" for self-checking paragraphs had enabled my students to produce far richer and more thorough paragraphs.

Cathy, who had written the paragraph on the baseball game, is probably guilty of overkill in the following paragraph on a doughnut shop, but she has produced thorough analysis:

Subject: working in a doughnut shop

Often characterized as the "graveyard shift," the midnight to six a.m. shift is anything but. If it is a graveyard, it is the liveliest cemetery I have ever been in. Because of the hours, more responsibility is given to the worker. One of the best parts about working the midnight shift is the absence of supervision, as the owner usually leaves at 12:30. The crew of three people--a baker, a finisher, and a counterperson--are responsible for any situation that arises and the consequences of action taken. Thus, when I work, the baker and I share the responsibility for all the decisions. Making change and writing up orders occur every night. Furthermore, not only is there no supervision, but the midnight shift is one of the roughest to work. The constant pressure of having to finish a large production of doughnuts in five hours has caused the nickname "make it or break it" to arise. About

twenty out of twenty-four new employees have quit after one night of working on the midnight shift. The pressure is even greater on the weekends that include an order of 150 additional dozen doughnuts. Even though there is an increase in production, there is no increase in help, except a fry-boy to assist the baker. The doughnuts are still expected to be finished in five hours, around 5 a.m., with the order packed. Besides the usual pressures, there are often unforeseen hazards that arise. Robbery is an ever-present worry, especially since Dunkin' Donuts has been the victim before losing seventy-five dollars in the theft. Because of the high winds and severe thunderstorms, power outage is common. With power loss, hundreds of yeast doughnuts have been ruined, causing chaos when the electricity returned because we lost hours of work only to have to start over again. Hazards involving the material aspects of the shop are not the only hazards. Failure of the next shift to appear for work causes the night workers to stay over until they are relieved because they are responsible for the shop. Every weekend, someone calls in five minutes before she is due to come in saying she is sick or the electricity at her house went out. It is amazing how electricity becomes a common outlet for excuse!

Jeff, further analyzing the physician, produced the following paragraph:

As a volunteer in a critical care unit, one sees an astonishing irony: Although the physician puts in such long hours and even risks his own health to help his patients, many times they do not appreciate his help or even want it. There is nothing more frustrating than offering help and having it blatantly refused. Since the physician is dealing with people in their worst physical and mental state, he should not let their prejudices and comments annoy him. Yet when people are sick, even the kindest, most compassionate person can turn cruel to the doctor who is trying to help him. For example, in St. Joseph's Hospital, Dr. Rashid, a devout Moslem, was

> called a "blood-sucking Jew" by a seventy-year-old woman whom he had helped the previous day. Foreign doctors are often insulted as incompetents. Such patient fear and ingratitude is, on rare occasions, deserved, but most times it is not. Often the doctor's professional help is taken advantage of by the patient for monetary gains. For example, a California doctor performed an emergency tracheotomy on a female accident victim. Being a model, the girl later sued him for malpractice because his life-saving operation supposedly ruined her career. The volunteer can easily see the frustration such a doctor experiences while worrying if his medical knowledge will put him in jail. Her action is not uncommon and explains the reason for high-cost malpractice insurance; such malpractice claims are easily collected. For example, recently an ex-Playboy bunny sued her doctor for removal of a boil that did not heal perfectly; she collected a large sum of money. Also an opera singer for the New York Metropolitan Opera sued the Laryngology Department at St. Luke's Hospital for ruining her voice as a result of a tumor removed from the trachea.

Both paragraphs represent a rigor in analytic thinking that characterizes professional paragraphs. Applying this heuristic forced these students through a complete and thorough writing process as they swung back and forth from thinking to writing to thinking to revising. The heuristic has enormous generative power. A student confronting a blank sheet of paper experiences a felt difficulty, but the need to produce levels of generalization means students never have "nothing to say." A student forced to lower and lower levels of generalization and allowed time to pause for what Mina Shaughnessy and Linda Flower call "play" either bursts with points to make or can define exploration to engage in.

A summary of the collaborative enterprise appears as an appendix to this text. It is worth observing that although the paragraph heuristic

consists of "rules," it is not rigid. If neither professor nor a cadre of academic scholars or critics has already supplied a structure for students, if their writing, to use Britton's terms, is "compelled" rather than "perfunctory," the heuristic can permit growth of organic form. Like the collaborative effort itself, the paragraph heuristic forces complicated original thought. The following paragraph from a freshman history paper compares the French and American revolutions:

> A second contrast is that the American Revolution was a defensive revolution and the French Revolution was an offensive revolution. After the colonies were taxed upon their tea, they defended themselves by starting off with the Boston Tea Party where they preserved the constitutions of the colonies and all their rights. Also, the colonists tried to restore harmony through long addresses to both the king and the parliament through July of 1775. The British continued to oppress the colonies' rights, forcing the use of arms to gain what they deserved. Exactly the opposite happened in France. The destroying of principles, governmental structures, order, and a lot of other institutions were offensive acts, where violence and terror reigned. The French people had spontaneous outbursts, whereas the Americans were more or less in an organized fashion, having a definite goal in mind. They were not defending written laws and rights of the different classes; they were making new ones as they went along, disregarding the bloodshed and disorder.

Because the subject is academic, students automatically assume this paragraph must be an example of good writing. It cannot compare to the following paragraph on professional wrestling, admittedly uneven in style, yet an interesting contrast to that first Orioles paragraph:

The sport of professional wrestling has been growing steadily. With more fans buying tickets to watch wrestling matches, wrestling matches at the Baltimore Civic Center are often sold out. The promoters of the sport have deliberately created a larger market. Professional wrestling had to become more attractive to the fans because wrestling in itself is a very boring sport. To combat this, the mechanics of the sport were changed. Instead of take-downs and reversals, pro-wrestling created body slams and back breakers. The promoters cornered the market on what their audience wanted to see--violence and plenty of it. Many former college standouts have been recruited for the sport. Names such as Bruno Sammartino and Bob Backlund are synonomous with pro-wrestling; both wrestled in college, Backlund at Iowa and Sammartino at Minnesota. Backlund is the present worldwide wrestling champion. What lured these men to professional wrestling was the large salaries offered by the promoters. According to the weekly Pro Wrestling magazine, both Sammartino and Backlund make in excess of $400,000. But men who had no previous wrestling experience were also lured into the profession by the money. When large audiences come to see violence, why not hire the biggest and strongest men available? Ken Protera, an ex-Olympic heavyweight weightlifter, is a perfect example of a promoter's dream. Pro wrestlers train for every match by going over dramatic moves. The more violent the men can act in the ring, the more the audience loves it.

Theorists such as Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, Ross Winterowd, James Kinneavy, Kenneth Bruffee concede the impossibility of ever mapping out all the routes writers' thoughts might take. Thus, while classroom discussion of possible paragraph structures--comparison/contrast, classification, cause/effect--may be intriguing and even produce good paragraphs, material so produced is artificial. The paragraphs on busing, the doughnut shop, and physician frustration are controlled

by metaphors; the wrestling paragraph is an elaborate causal sequence. Sound writing is always the product of a writer's internalized thought structure rather than of student mastery of assorted paragraph formats.

Obviously I like this paragraph heuristic. It is a fine pedagogical tool. My aim, however, has not been solely to turn process into product and peddle it here. My "pitch" is for collaborative learning on the college level, with that endorsement now resting on a succession of small group sessions on a variety of writing topics that in the past year have produced shared breakthroughs for students and instructor alike.

As a result of their discoveries through collaboration, my freshmen each semester develop both a coherent system for and much greater confidence in their ability to self-check the quality of the writing they produce. Students should be learning to be their own editors. A freshman writing class should break teacher-dependency. If students see that adherence to principle, not personal preference, determines a professor's judgment of their writing, they will aggressively seek to learn across the curriculum what principles govern Quality in each discipline. As a result, they will know at the moment they hand in a paper in any course what the probable grade will be.

Occasionally abandoning conventional college classroom format for collaborative learning has made me more self-sufficient too. Presenting age-old textbook rules in dusty traditional settings for many years failed to illuminate for me the principles of a good written product or the writing process students use to produce it. When I took the paragraphing problem to my class, we participated in what amounted to an eye-opening pre-writing experience for me. I learned not only how to teach

the paragraph but what to teach. I have synthesized the results in written form. Yet, I do and you should consider these insights tentative.

The best teachers of writing--a Donald Murray, a Kenneth Bruffee, a Mina Shaughnessy--have always been eclectic and experimental. Collaborative learning is one sound trick of the trade for permitting new discovery in the burgeoning field of composition.

A Selective Analysis of Student Paragraphs

The Heuristic

#1: Proposition: Oriole games are exciting.
Student Diagnosis: "doesn't-go-anywhere" paragraph.
Restated: no levels of generalization

#2: Proposition: The combat soldier is treated harshly.
Student Diagnosis: A "clunk" paragraph
Restated: no intermediary levels of generalizations to produce analytic structure

RULE #1: Make sure a paragraph, unless introductory, transitional, or final, has four or more layers of

#3: Proposition: Life guards seek attention.
Student Diagnosis: Bixby Bigly is "unreal."
Restated: detail structured, but concrete/general rather than concrete/specific evidence

#4: Proposition: Tee-shirts are national "billboards."
Student Diagnosis: "Where are the tee-shirts?"
Restated: levels of generalization produce analysis, but no concrete/specific evidence for clarity.

RULE #2: Make sure the bottom level is actual-factual/specific-concrete evidence, accurate and appropriate.

#5: Proposition: Doctor and family lack treatment.
Student Diagnosis: "Which small symptoms?"
Restated: no concrete/specific detail; redundant.

RULE #3: Establish pausing places on each level of generalization above the bottom level.

#6: Proposition: Criminals spoil NYC for the tourist.
Student Diagnosis: not a complete list of "close encounters of the criminal kind in New York City."
Restated: analysis not comprehensive

#7: Proposition: Coaching staff does not properly instruct and train children.
Student Diagnosis: "Here's-one here's-another" transitions
Restated: weak cohesive ties--no synthesis.

#8: Proposition: Busing creates a vicious circle.
Student Diagnosis: "Good!"
Restated: cohesive ties signal complex casual analysis.

RULE #4: Make sure any one level is comprehensive in coverage; use cohesive devices to assure and communicate this.

#9 and #10: apply heuristic successfully though need work on level of sentences.

#11: formal academic content deserves more thorough analysis and specific support.

#12: Thorough analysis dignifies even professional wrestling!

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